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Responsible Technology (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Responsible Technology. Stephen V. Monsma (Editor). Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986, 252 pp., \$12.95. Reviewed by Charles C. Adams, Associate Professor of Engineering.

According to the authors of *Responsible Technology*, technology is "a distinct human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures for practical ends or purposes" (19). Given such a broad understanding of technology, it is only natural that an introductory book on the subject should be written not by one person, but by a multi-talented team. That team includes Stephen Monsma (public policy and political science), Clifford Christians (communications), Eugene Dykema (economics), Arie Leegwater (natural science), Egbert Schuurman (philosophy of technology), and Lambert Van Poolen (engineering). While the text suffers from some of the drawbacks inherent in any creation of a committee, its primary objective probably could not have been achieved by one author writing alone.

In the preface the authors described three basic commitments which they held in common. First, they were committed to "writing a book for the general reader, not primarily for the scholar specializing in the philosophy of science or technology or in other academic subfields" (ix). This objective has been, for the most part, achieved. The book will not likely find itself in many high school classrooms, and it does not have the "entertainment quality" seemingly required for the mass market. But serious, general readers will be rewarded for their diligent study of it.

The second commitment of the authors was to the belief "that doing technology is not a neutral activity but one that involves valuing of a profound, fundamental nature" (ix). This crucial point is carefully developed in an early chapter devoted exclusively to it, and is reiterated throughout the book. Perhaps the uniqueness and the greatest strength of the book is that the "value-ladenness of technology" is not merely identified as an abstract principle, but is fleshed out

in numerous examples. In addition, the authors attempt to identify a system of norms for technological design.

The third commitment was "to the belief that technology, as one form of human activity, must be done under the Lordship of Jesus Christ" (ix). This book is solidly biblical. While one might argue with some of the definitions or examples, one cannot argue with its basic direction unless one does so from a non-Christian or from a radical, world-flight point of view.

The first two chapters in the book are broad and introductory. In them the authors argue that Christians need to understand technology and cannot escape its pervasive influence. Here they also try to define some of their terms. One weakness that becomes apparent in the chapter on "Definitions and Distinctions" is that in avoiding the esoteric definitions of an academically precise philosophy of technology (and also, I would imagine, to maintain consensus), they have taken a "middle road" position on many key terms. For example, phrases like "technological object" are not used in the careful and consistent way that they are in Egbert Schuurman's *Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1980). But neither are they used in their conventional sense. This is helpful in introducing philosophy of technology to the neophyte. But it may be confusing if that neophyte goes on to read Schuurman. I think the book would have been better if the authors had been more careful to remain consistent with Schuurman's prior work.

The third and fourth chapters deal with two very critical world-view questions related to technology: "Is technology neutral?" and "Do Christians have any reason to work in technology?" The first is answered with a vigorous NO! and the second with an equally vigorous YES! The third chapter makes a strong case for the non-neutrality of technology by discussing values and norms. But the fourth chapter in discussing "The Cultural Mandate" most fully addresses both questions."

The cultural mandate means that men and women as cultural agents have been placed in creation in order to bring the creation to its full development. They are to open up the creation, to bring to light the treasures that the Lord God has stored up in it. In that opening-up process all things are designed to come into their own and to be assigned their own place. There is a continuity to this development, with succeeding generations being able to bring out more complex, more intricate aspects of creation by building on the achievements of prior generations. The original paradise before sin was a rural garden; the future paradise that will mark the culmination of human history is a city, the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21.

Doing technology—the forming and transforming of natural creation with the aid of tools and procedures—is a part of human beings' activity as formers of culture. (39)

The authors, however, do not use the cultural mandate as an uncritical call to jump on the bandwagon of modern Western technologism. Unlike those Christians who see technology as a neutral tool and accommodate themselves to it, or those, like Jacques Ellul, who see only its demonic power, the authors view technology as a way in which we must respond to God in the context of his fallen world:

Neither washing one's hands of the present-day culture nor accommodating it is appropriate. Another choice must be made. In this choice we must continue to honor the fact that there is a cultural mandate. As Christians we are to be doers of technology seeking to fulfill their God-given mandate to shape and mold culture in keeping with God's normative will. But in fulfilling the cultural mandate, we take part in the line of creation and redemption, while the prevailing line of our culture is that of the Fall and secularization. Thus we are exiles in our own culture—exiles in Babylon. (55)

Chapter 5 of the book is entitled "A Guide to Responsible Technology." After arguing for a theory of normativity in technology, the authors attempt to express what form those technological norms might take. Here "norms" mean, very simply, the will of God for our lives in the area of technology. For example, "cultural appropriateness," "open communication," "stewardship," "delightful harmony," "justice," "caring," and "trust" are identified in the section on "A Structure of Normative Principles" as normative principles for various aspects of technology. Those aspects correspond to the last eight modal aspects identified by the Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd in his "theory of cosmic modalities." While one might argue with a scheme that attempts to identify one (and only one) norm with each modal aspect, the exercise is none-the-less very fruitful. In a later chapter entitled "A Design Philosophy,"

these norms are further explicated, and concrete examples of how they might give guidance to the design engineer are detailed.

In chapters six through eight the concern is with how technology relates to other areas of modern life, namely science, economics, and the state. Many superficial clichés have been written regarding these relationships, but these three chapters avoid superficiality. They treat the relationships in considerable depth, using numerous examples, and remaining faithful to the basic spirit that drives the book as a whole. These chapters demonstrate that the authors did, indeed, work together out of a common world view.

Chapters nine and ten, alluded to earlier, develop a design philosophy and attempt to illustrate what the authors call "responsible design." This is the unique part of the book, the rich and practical fruit of Christian philosophy and Christian communal scholarship. It ought to be required reading for any Christian engineer or engineering student.

The last two chapters of the book appropriately call a technological society to repentance and redirection. In particular, they call Christians to witness prophetically in technology, whether they be professional technologists or simply those who by the very nature of modern life interact with technology daily.

The cadence of our culture is set by the beat of the technological drum. In and of itself, this basic fact should be cause for neither great rejoicing nor great alarm. The crucial question is, if this is so, who or what is determining the beat? The central message of this book is that in modern society this beat is largely determined by a drive for power, for human mastery apart from the will of God. Humankind has revolted against its Maker, has declared its independence from him and his will, and all too often drives ruthlessly for a salvation of material prosperity brought about by technological prowess.

In contrast is a technology done out of love and in response to God's normative will. A sharper contrast is hard to imagine. Throughout this book it has been argued that technology, as a part of the cultural task given humankind by God, must be done as a form of serving others and of caring for the rest of creation. Love is the motive; God's norms are its guide. True, our efforts are hampered by the continuing effects of the Fall, and therefore we cannot bring about God's kingdom of shalom by human efforts alone. Nevertheless, a technology done out of love and in obedience to God's will is certainly a part of a vision of his kingdom, which we are commanded to seek (Matt 6:33). (200)

This book is the best general introduction to a Christian perspective of technology available today. I cannot imagine anyone who would not benefit greatly by studying it carefully.